

# A Rare Duplicate in Organological Iconography:

*The Tepe Giyan Situlae*

By: Richard Dumbrill

In her excellent publication: *Ancient Instruments of Western Asia*, Joan Rimmer<sup>1</sup> described the fragment of a situla from Tepe Giyan, near Nihawand in Western Iran. She thought the scene was impossible to identify because of the limited size of the fragment showing, she wrote, two seated and two standing figures. However, we see the four of them standing as there is no evidence of stools, all stand at the same height which they would not, should two of them had been sitting. There is one string instrumentalist and a percussionist. Two figures standing behind the musicians are seen clapping their hands. All four wear similar robes and headdresses. It is not possible to identify their gender.



Figure 1. Fragment of a copper situla showing a procession of musicians (BM 128620).  
Height: 8.50 centimetres; width: 5 centimetres; weight: 70.50 grammes.

This fragment is dated to the Third Dynasty of Ur and would have been made around 2200 to 2100BC. Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin<sup>2</sup> dated it from about 2200BC. However, an early to mid-second millennium period has been advanced on the basis of a pottery parallel found near at a grave near Tepe Giyan<sup>3</sup>.

Then, fortuitously, I came across a situla in the Mahboubian Collection<sup>4</sup> which appears not only to be from the same workshop as the fragment in British Museum, but of which it would be a copy with, however, variations in the depiction and function of some of the figures.

During the analysis of the narratives on these objects, the British Museum fragment will be labeled 'A' and the Mahboubian situla, 'B'.

Generally, 'A' and 'B' would both have been made of chased and repoussé copper alloy plate and had the same shape and size. A frieze of similar style decorated the rim of both situlæ:



Figure 2. Decoration on rim of 'A'.



Figure 3. Decoration on rim of 'B'.

The primary figures on 'A' and 'B' are also similar:

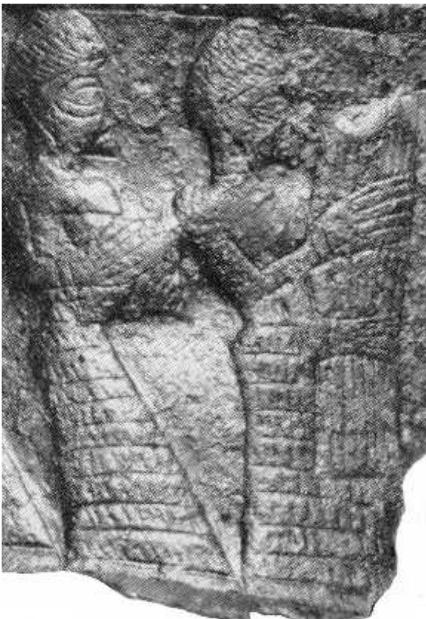


Figure 4. Musicians on 'A'.



Figure 5. Musicians on 'B'.

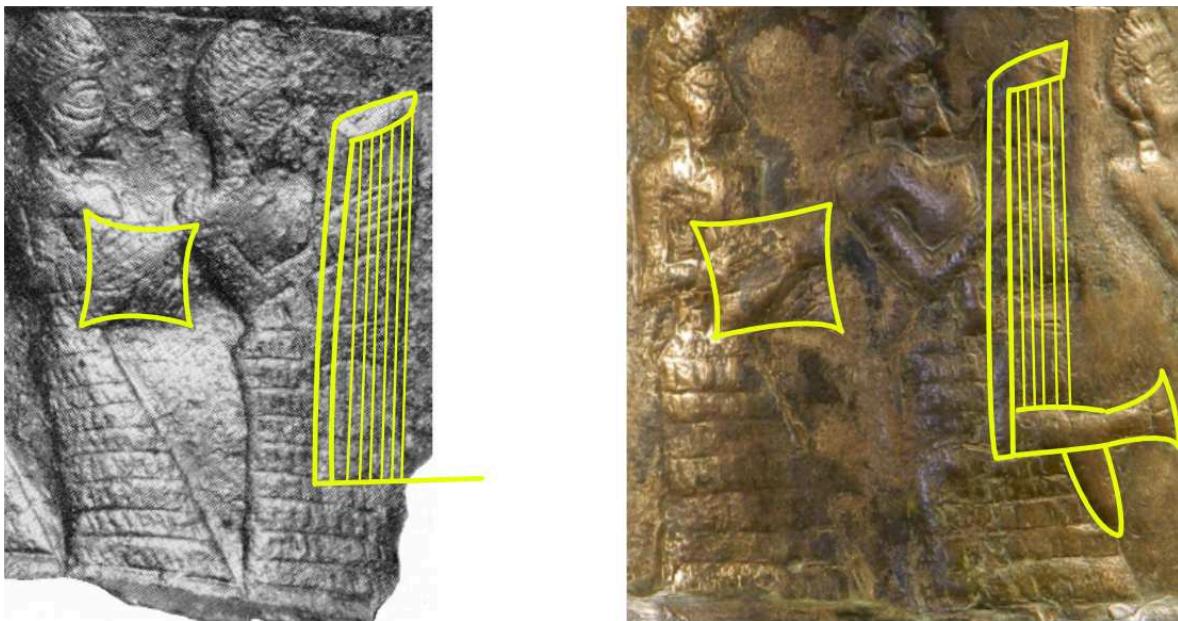


Figure 6. Outline of the instruments in both items 'A' and 'B'.

The instrument to the left, in both items, is a square drum probably known as Akkadian *adapu*, for reasons explored below. It is a Sumerian loanword<sup>5</sup>. It is also known from a lexical text as a ‘copper *adapu*’ which suggests that its soundboard, or ‘head’ would initially have been made from a copper sheet. However, the Arabic ‘duff’, a Moroccan square-drum consists in a square wooden frame with leather tightly stretched on each side. The *adapu*-‘duff’ survived with the Hebrew ‘toph’ and the Hindi ‘duffde’, and in other languages. According to an Arabian tradition, the ‘duff’ had been invented by Tubal<sup>6</sup>, the legendary copper-smith, perhaps from Sumerian Bad-tibira<sup>7</sup> meaning ‘wall of the copper workers’. According to the *kitāb al-‘aghānī*<sup>8</sup>, Tuwais<sup>9</sup> (632-710) was the first musician known under Islam as using the square ‘duff’-drum for only accompaniment of his singing.

The harp represented to the right of the *adapu*-duff player is only known to the Elamite Culture. It is a oblong instruments fitted with a sturdy console and with about six strings. The instrument in ‘B’ has an added protuberance to the under side of its console which might have been used as a foot on which to rest the instrument when the musician played sitting. However, on ‘B’ the foot is not resting on the ground which suggests that when the musician played it standing, a shoulder-strap would have held it in a playing position.

In ‘A’, to the left of the *adapu*-duff player are standing musicians clapping their hands. as seen in figure 7 below.



Figure 7. View to the left of the *adapu*-duff player.

Two figures clapping their hands are shown to the left of the *adapu*-duff player. Behind them stands another character facing the opposite way. A seated figure is seen further to the left with their left arm raised. However, nothing much more can be said about the scene on 'A' due to damage and because of the small size of the fragment.

Nevertheless, it is extremely rare to find two items which doubtless would have come from the same workshop, at the same time and possibly made by the same copper-smith. Although the scenes are not really identical, as we shall see with the analysis of item 'B', it is possible to say that the copper-smith would have offered their clients a choice of variations on a generative festive narrative. Interestingly, another item was found close to where the item 'A' was excavated and its is now possible to say that it was the handle to the situla of fragment 'A' on the basis of the similarity with the handle on item 'B'. Both handles are about the same size with one rivet at the bottom and two at the top.



Figure 8. Handle unearthed close to fragment 'A' in Tepe Giyan.



Scene A



Scene B



Scene C



Scene D

Figure 9. The four scenes on the 'B' situla.

The 'B' situla displays four scenes, two of which, A and C, opposite to one another, being identical, with a harpist and a drummer. Scene B has two dancers clapping their elbows and hands, and scene C has two seated dignitaries drinking what was probably some kind of beer which they sipped from canes dipped into a vessel placed on a stand.

Above the drinking vessel floats the disk symbol of the ‘sun-god’ DINGIR<sup>10</sup>, striated with four lines on each cardinal point and resting on a crescent. This symbol was very common throughout the Ancient Near East as attested on seals from the Sargonic Empire<sup>11</sup> (2334-2000BC) and from the age of Hammurabi<sup>12</sup> and later (2000-1500BC).

Such scenes with music, dancing and drinking are well-recorded in the Ancient Near East as mentioned our a recently published paper: *A New Addition to the Corpus of Organology: A proto-Elamite Harp*<sup>13</sup>. However, what is specific to the Elamite model is the usage of harps unique to that society. For a description of an early Elamite Harp, see the aforementioned paper. The harp depicted in items ‘A’ and ‘B’ is unique as it is oblong and has a strong console which might indicate an important cumulative tension of the strings. It is also significant that the strings which are estimated at about six are almost of the same length. This suggests that each of them must have had a different mass to compensate for the lack of length differences. However, it is impossible to say if this type of harp was a melodic instrument, or an instrument capable of producing specific melodies, or if this type of harp was a rhythmic instrument used only for strumming.

Stylistically, the scenes depicted on these situlae are typical of Elamite art. The head-dresses, robes and the treatment of faces are unique to that culture. Additionally to the identification of two distinctive Elamite harps, their design and organology reinforces the view that the influence Elam absorbed from neighbouring cultures only remained superficially brushed over a much deeper ethnocentric identity which not only surfaced through aesthetics but also by means of isolate linguistic identities.



Figure 10. The duplicate of the situla in the Mahboubian Collection.  
Height: 12 cm; Bottom width; 12 cm; top width 11 cm; weight: 195 gm.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rimmer, Joan, *Ancient Musical Instruments of Western Asia in the British Museum*, Published by the Trustees of the British Museum, London 1969. P. 26, figure 5, and pl.viib,

<sup>2</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin, Marcelle, 1937a/ Note sur la provenance asiatique d'un tambour égyptien.

<sup>3</sup> Contenau, Georges, *L'Art de l'Asie occidentale ancienne*, Paris, éd. G. van Oest, 1928; Ghirshman, Roman, 1935, *Fouilles du Tepe Giyan*, Paris, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner 12.Rue Vavin(VI).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mahboubiancollection.com/houshang-mahboubian>. Roya Mahboubian informed me in a verbal communication that the situla was not excavated by her grandfather, Benjamin, but that he bought the item at auction in Iran just before the revolution in 1978.

<sup>5</sup> *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, Vol. 'a', p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tubal>

<sup>7</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bad-tibira>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kitab-al-aghani>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.autostraddle.com/a-muslim-rupaul-at-the-dawn-of-islam-tuwais-and-the-mukhannathun-198612/>

<sup>10</sup> Labat, *Manuel d'épigraphie*, plates 48 and 49.

<sup>11</sup> Collon, Dominique, *First Impressions*, 1987, p. 38, pl. 130;

<sup>12</sup> Collon, Dominique, *First Impressions*, 1987, p. 42, pl. 136, 138, 139, 141, 151, 152; p. 45, pl. 157; p. 48, pl. 181; p. 49, pl. 183, 184, 185, 189; p. 53, pl. 202, etc.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/114027919/Elamite\\_harp](https://www.academia.edu/114027919/Elamite_harp)